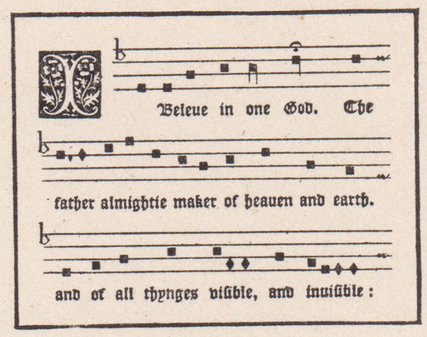
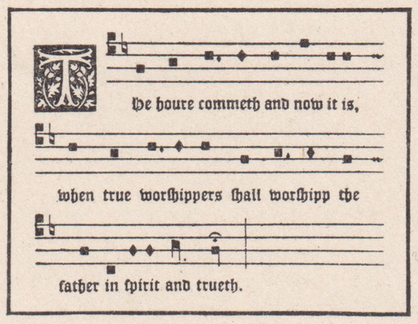
# DEPARTMENT OF CHURCH MUSIC

UNDER DIRECTION OF HAROLD W. GILBERT, MUS.BAC.

## "King's English"

One who is neither a philologist nor a phonetician may be presuming somewhat to write upon the subject of correct pronunciation of English in singing. Yet the subject is so important to choirmasters and choirs, and so little discussed in any detail in these circles, that it may not be amiss to make some general observations relative to it, and to call attention to a number of glaring faults that are being perpetuated in our American choirs, chiefly through carelessness.

At the outset let us clearly understand that we are concerned here with *pronunciation,* not with *enunciation.* The latter has to do with distinctness of articulation, while the former has to do with proper sounds and accents. A man may pronounce his English correctly but fail to enunciate distinctly enough to be perfectly understood, let us say at a distance, or when singing. It is just as true, alas, that one may mispronounce his English and yet be perfectly understood. But who would defend mispronunciation on such grounds?

While a singer is taking great pains to make his musical sounds conform to high standards of art and authority, should he not at the same time be conscientious about his treatment of the words that are the vehicle of his musical art? In fact, does he not risk condemnation of his whole musical performance by listeners whose educated and cultured tastes his mispronunciations offend? On the other hand, if correct pronunciations fall upon unaccustomed ears, and therefore seem to give offense, does not the situation present an opportunity for education? In this enlightened age and in this enlightened country we should have the courage to make a stand for what we know to be correct and authoritative.

But what is correct and authoritative in pronunciation? We recognize that living language is undergoing growth and change, and what is rejected by some authorities may be accepted by others. But for the purposes of American choirmasters a present safe guide is Webster's Dictionary.

In the introductory matter to the unabridged edition of this dictionary there is a section called "A Guide to Pronunciation," which deals with its subject scientifically and exhaustively. Chapters I, II, III, and IV should be read and digested by anyone who wants to know the whys and wherefores of pronunciation. In the light of this authority let us see what conclusions we may reach with regard to a few of the many phases presented.

One point must be agreed upon before we go further—we are approaching pronunciation from the angle of church music; we shall be purists, if you like; we shall not condone colloquialisms, nor be satisfied with the elisions incidental to rapid conversation. We shall deal with what Webster's Dictionary refers to as "the very formal speech of special occasions." If we start making concessions, we may become hopelessly entangled. A good speaker may, in rapid speech, say *'nd* for *and,* but a good choir singer should not do so, for his words need not tumble forth so rapidly as to necessitate it. In fact, should such a contraction be sung to a prolonged note, it would become ridiculous. The dropping of the letter *h* in *him, his,* etc., not so easily defended even in rapid speech, should be shunned in singing.

The proper syllabification of a word sometimes corrects a mispronunciation. Such a word, for example, as *glory* is often heard pronounced with the *r* added to the first syllable, thus: *glor-y,* which induces an incorrect sounding of the *o.* If the *r* be correctly placed in the second syllable, the *o* very naturally receives its long sound. *Possess* is another such word, often mispronounced *po-ssess.* The first syllable is *pos,* which easily determines the sound of *o.* Some other words in this category are: *de-scend, be-lieve, de-spise, cor-rect, pe-tition.* (Not always does syllabification disclose the correct pronunciation, however, as may be observed in the word *di-rect.*)

The sound of *u* is often carelessly made into *oo* in such words as *due, tumult, supreme, duty, lute, tune.*

Final *y* should not become *ee,* but should sound like the *i* in *pin,* in such words as *holy, mercy, heavenly, godly.*

It has become almost traditional in American choirs to pronounce short *a* (as in *hat*) like the Italian *a* (as in *arm*). This is, of course, an abuse of the language, and should not be continued. A perfectly good tonal quality can be produced with the short *a,* although this view is contrary to the opinion prevailing in some quarters.

On the other hand, what Webster's Dictionary calls the "intermediate" *a* should be used in *ask, last, path, pass, staff, clasp, chant, dance, command,* and many similar words. English choirs do not discriminate between the intermediate *a* and the Italian *a,* but pronounce them all like the *a* in *arm.*

A common fault occurs in pronouncing *our.* It should sound exactly like *hour,* not like *are.*

*Heaven* should be pronounced as one syllable. Composers have mishandled this word in many instances, necessitating the distinct sounding of a second syllable.

*Savior* (*Saviour*) is a stumbling-block. Webster's Dictionary pronounces the final syllable as *yer,* but this is a concession to rapid speech. The word is in the class with *error, donor,* and other words with *or* endings, all of which are treated the same way. In singing, the best pronunciation of these final syllables would seem to be *or,* not *er.*

And finally, Hymn 509 contains the much mispronounced word *short-lived,* which should rhyme with *arrived.*

Great improvement in the pronunciation of choirs would result from a careful distinction of the various sounds of *e,* of the sound of *wh,* and of *sts* (in *hosts, wastes,* etc.).

Most of these niceties are foreign to our daily usage in conversation, and therefore cause us some self-consciousness when at first practiced. But lack of courage is a poor excuse for lack of care. If we would worship through the medium of English, let us make it the "King's English"!

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